

Thunder Across the Swamp: The Fight for the Lower Mississippi, February 1863-May 1863

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Review

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Frazier, Donald S. *Thunder Across the Swamp: The Fight for the Lower Mississippi, February 1863-May 1863*. State House Press, \$59.95 ISBN 978-193333744-9

Delving Deeper into Louisiana's Civil War

In the vast arena of books on the Civil War there appears, once in a while, a well done piece on a little known but critically important part of this great struggle. Dr. Frazier has accomplished this with his well done work, *Thunder Across the Swamp: The Fight for the Lower Mississippi, February 1863-May 1863*. This volume is the perfect companion piece to Dr. Frazier's previous work, *Fire in the Cane Field*.

Dr. Frazier's work covers the actions, mostly on the west bank of the Mississippi River that illustrate the give and take struggle between the forces of Confederate General Richard Taylor and Union General Nathaniel Banks. These actions parallel General US Grant's advance on the Confederate stronghold of Vicksburg, 200 miles upriver. The book tells the story of the Union attempts to gain control of two key points, the intersection of the Red River and the Mississippi River and the southern anchor of the last stretch of the Mississippi River under Confederate control, Port Hudson, Louisiana. The author also includes the account of David Farragut's attempt to run past the batteries of Port Hudson and the ineffective attempt of Bank's army to take Port Hudson by land in March of 1863.

The book is well researched, well footnoted, and contains excellent maps of such little known actions as the Battles of Bisland, Irish Bend and Vermillion Bayou. Dr. Frazier has done an excellent job of describing not only the actions but the geography and physical conditions of the ground over which the armies fought. I make this statement with great certainty due to the fact that for nearly 10 years I served as the manager of the Acadian Unit of Jean Lafitte National

Historical Park and Preserve. In that capacity I completed the initial surveys of these battle sites for the NPS National Battlefield Protection Program and became intimately familiar with the terrain of southern Louisiana. Dr. Frazier's excellent writing style took me back to the bayous, sugar cane fields, and small towns of this beautiful and very unique region. His descriptions are right on target.

Of special note in the work is the use by Dr. Frazier of primary sources. He does this, not only to describe the military story, but to develop the little known social and cultural differences within the two opposing forces. The reader will be surprised to see the different points of view, especially within the Confederate forces of the hard fighting, between strongly independent Texas troops and the vastly culturally different Creole, Acadian and Anglo troops that made up the Louisianans in Richard Taylor's Army. Dr. Frazier also goes into excellent detail to describe the Union troops. The author shows the contrast between the battle-hardened veterans of the capture of New Orleans and the battles of the Bayou Lafourche region in 1862 to the newly arrived 90-day units that would see their first combat in the Bayou Teche actions. Of special note is the writer's continuing account of the story of the Native Guards, some of the first African-American troops raised to fight for the Union and the beginning of their transition into Banks' *Corps d' Afrique*. Of particular note are the accounts of New England, Midwest and Mid-Atlantic Union soldiers suddenly thrust into a totally different world of backwards running bayous, alligators, and poisonous snakes.

The volume also goes into detail about the horrors of war. The volume looks in detail at the destruction of property, the seizure of resources to feed and equip the opposing forces, and the suffering of the civilian populations as the armies, despite the best efforts of some of their officers, laid waste to one of the garden spots of our earth. Dr. Frazier does an excellent job of telling the difficult political story of this culturally significant area where French was the first language of many of the local inhabitants. Imagine, if you would, how you might have felt as a soldier for either side if, when entering one of the small towns of this region, you saw not the flag of the North or South but the French tri-color hanging from people's homes and private property.

One other note that deserves attention in the volume is the detail given to the little known actions on the waterways of this region. Dr. Frazier has done an excellent job of telling the story of the naval/land engagements at Fort DeRussy,

Fort Burton, Grand Lake and on the Atchafalaya River. These sharp, bloody actions resulted in great loss of life and the capture of naval vessels by both sides.

The volume concludes with what was the high point of the military career of Union General Nathaniel Banks. This is the story of his driving Richard Taylor's army all the way up the Red River to Natchitoches and then turning south east to join the troops advancing north from Baton Rouge, completely encircle and isolate the 7,000 Confederates under General Franklin Gardener at Port Hudson. This move, in coordination with the moves of General Grant against Vicksburg, would spell final doom for the Confederate forces trying to hold on to one last stretch of the Mississippi River.

Overall, I highly recommend this volume; Dr. Frazier has done a great job. I would also like to recommend that, even though the volume ends with the Federals closing the trap in the Port Hudson garrison, the story of Richard Taylor's re-capture of the Bayou Teche region and his army's attempts to break the Union siege of Port Hudson is one I would urge the avid student of the Civil War to continue to explore with other existing works.

Dale Phillips has worked for the National Park Service for 36 years. His assignments have included being an interpreter at Gettysburg, interpretive ranger at Fort Sumter, supervisory park ranger/historian at Chickamauga/Chattanooga NMP, unit manager of the Chalmette (Battle of New Orleans site) Unit of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, unit manager of the Acadian Unit of Jean Lafitte, and superintendent of the George Rogers Clark National Historical Park. His present position is that of superintendent of the Lincoln Home National Historic Site in Springfield, IL.